

Handwritten shorthand characters on a blue-lined background.

Handwritten shorthand symbols on a blue-lined background.

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Handwritten shorthand symbols for 'The' and 'of'.

Handwritten shorthand symbols for 'USA' and 'the'.

Handwritten shorthand symbols for 'and' and 'the'.

Handwritten shorthand symbols for 'the' and 'of'.

Business Letters

Business letters have changed a lot over the years. Looking back at some quite old shorthand books, the sample commercial letters contained many obsolete phrases, but they were nevertheless very short and to the point. Being quick to write, type and read, they kept everyone happy by not wasting anyone's time. They were in stark contrast to the elaborate writing style of Victorian book prose, which presented the material as authoritative and worthy of attention, carefully considered and composed, rather than dashed off in a hurry. In fact, close attention was essential, as nothing really made complete sense until one reached the end of the long-winded sentence, which was often also the end of the paragraph. This dense and meandering style lingered on in government documents and correspondence, and sometimes commercial ones, and it seemed almost designed to intimidate the reader into instantly obeying the contents of the letter.

I am very glad that business letters nowadays have become even simpler and friendlier in their approach. The language style must match what the recipient is expecting for that type of business and subject, and any departure from it has to be carefully thought about, so that the right impression is given and professionalism is maintained. A chatty and over-friendly letter from a solicitor telling you some sober news is obviously not acceptable. A stiff and formal letter inviting you to the opening of a new café, club or boutique is also out of place. I like a plain and clear letter without frills, but if the helpful tone descends into what I call "hand holding", I feel I am back in the first class of primary school. I have often been involved in drafting letters,

reports and publicity materials. A specific idea, suggestion or instruction must be presented clearly and briefly, not so long that the reader gives up reading or ignores it, and not so short that it appears like a barked order from a sergeant major. When forms, slips and replies come back, it is quite chastening to find out how many ways people can misinterpret what seemed perfectly clear on the leaflet.

The following paragraphs provide some basic vocabulary for correspondence. The salutation used depends on how well the addressee is known: Dear Sir, Dear Madam, Dear Sir or Madam, Dear Mr Smith, Dear Mr and Mrs Brown, Dear Dr Jones, Dear Sir Michael, Dear John, Dear Mary. If the letter is part of admail, which is generally unaddressed, it may start with Dear Reader, Customer, Friends, or it might match the subject, such as Dear Driver, Parent, Home-owner, or Gardener. A letter that is to be forwarded to another third party whose name is unknown may be addressed "To whom it may concern".

The beginning of a letter should introduce what it is about and why it is being sent. Common phrases are: with reference to your letter; regarding our previous correspondence; in reply to your enquiry; further to our recent telephone conversation; I am writing in relation to our meeting last week. If something is being sent with the letter, you would say: please find enclosed the form you requested; I am attaching the application form that you asked for; I am sending with this letter our latest catalogue; we hope you will enjoy reading the enclosed brochure. Letters have enclosures and emails have attachments.

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Letters may end with a reminder of the action required: I look forward to receiving your reply; I look forward to hearing from you in due course; I look forward to the return of your completed application form within the next two weeks; I trust that the above comments are useful; I do hope this information will help you in your decision. More closing phrases are: please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information; I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have; I will be contacting you next week with the results of the report; I will be looking into the matter further and will let you know the conclusions as soon as they are available; we hope this settles the matter to your complete satisfaction.

A polite note of thanks or appreciation softens the ending: thank you for taking the time to write to us; we appreciate your interest in our company and products; thank you for considering this request; we appreciate your comments on this matter; your generosity with this donation is greatly appreciated. Endings vary according to the level of formality. Dear Sir ends with Yours faithfully. Dear Mr Smith ends with Yours sincerely. Yours truly is an older form current in the USA but not so much in the UK. Best wishes, kind or kindest regards and warmest greetings are much more informal and unlikely to be suitable for a plain business letter. There is also one special ending reserved exclusively for shorthand enthusiasts reading a shorthand blog - thank you for taking the time to read this article and I wish you every success in the future. Yours most sincerely, Blog Writer. (847 words)